

U. S. Customs House
312 Fore Street, on lot bounded
by Commercial, Fore, Pearl, and
Customs House Streets
Portland
Cumberland County
Maine

HABS No. ME-138

HABS
ME,
3-PORT,
25-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HABS
ME
3-PORT,
25-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

U. S. CUSTOMS HOUSE

HABS No. ME-138

Location: 312 Fore Street, occupying the block between Commercial and Fore Streets, and Pearl and Custom House Streets, Portland, Cumberland County, Maine

Present Owner: United States Federal Government, Department of the Treasury.

Present occupant and use: Used as Custom House by Treasury Department

Significance: According to the Custom House's Collector, Mr. Washburn, in 1872, when it was opened, Portland was the 7th or 8th port in the nation in duties on consumption and warehouse goods, and 3rd or 4th in amount of duties on goods through the Custom House. A magnificent Custom House would be worthy of the trade's importance in the city, and the city's in the nation. Washburn felt that general sympathy for Portland after the devastating fire of 1866, was partly responsible for generously increased appropriations for the building. As a result, the government had erected a building "such as would stand for ages...be an ornament to the place, and would transmit to future times an idea of the architecture of our time." Following Washburn, an English ship captain with a less historical orientation, "spoke of the new edifice as the most chaste and one of the finest buildings for customs purposes he had ever been in."

Chain of Title: Always owned by the Treasury Department of the Federal Government.

Date: The cornerstone was laid May 6, 1868. It was in use by October 1871 and formally opened April 1, 1872.

Architect: A. B. Mullet, Supervising Architect, Treasury Department. That it did great honor to the supervising architect, all who saw it would acknowledge." (Collector Washburn at the opening.)

Builders, suppliers,
etc:

It was built under Hugh McCullough, Secretary of Treasury, and J. F. Hartley and Edward Cooper, assistant Secretaries. B. Oertly was Assistant Supervising Architect and Henry Kingsbury was Supt. of Erection. The granite was contracted from E. C. Sargent of Boston.

Original Plan and
Construction:

The present building was authorized and \$50,000 appropriated in 1864. \$75,000 more was appropriated in 1866, and the building was begun March, '67. It was to be 3 stories on Commercial St., 2 on Fore Street. As the rock ledge underlying the property sloped from Fore Street to the harbor at up to 45°, they blasted to 4 feet for the basement at one end, and had to carry the foundation 39 feet down at the other-- 24 ft more than estimated. They carried the foundation down to the ledge at all points even though this was 20 ft. below high tide and necessitated coffer dams and two pumps. The material was Concord **granite**. (Report of Secretary of Treasury, 1857) The total cost was \$485,000 according to Washburn. The result, according to John Neal, was "One of the most beautiful buildings to be seen anywhere, either at home or abroad. The material is a very light-colored granite, from Concord, N.H.--resembling the finest marble. It cost about \$500,000 and has been thoroughly finished, and furnished within and without. It is believed to be fireproof, and is enriched with bronze and marble stairways and fireplaces, and magnificent chandeliers, and stuccoed ceilings, and our costliest native woods....This we have now rebuilt, is really something to boast of--a commercial Treasury and Palace, --worthy of our sincerest admiration."

Alterations:

Only minor changes have been made: the building is essentially as it originally was. In the central space some of the glass panels in the partitions have been removed. The lights there (as throughout the building) were gas; between each pair of arches around the cat-walk was a three-globed fixture, since removed. Four large light fixtures, each with about 30 or 40 globes mounted on wrought iron curliques in a pyramidal or conical form, hung from the ceiling. These were replaced with large electric globes and more recently with low flourescent lights. The smaller offices also have flourescent lighting now. The walls of the central room are now a uniform light color, but until 10 years ago their moldings and trim were gilt, like that of the ceiling. The double sets of small doors that form

small vestibules at the entrances have replaced single sets of large mahogany doors which were original.

Views:

In the Portland, Maine Evening Express, Aug. 20, 1963, p 15, a page of photographs including three inside views, ceiling of the main hall, and details of columns on the outside. An engraving before 1890 occurs in Views of Portland and Vicinity. A very good engraving is on p. 25 of John Neal's Portland Illustrated. A good early photo is on p. 5 of Portland Past and Present. A stereoptican slide in the office of the Collector in the Custom House, shows the interior of the central hall from the cat walk. In it the lighting fixtures show well, but the walls are uniformly colored and the gold leaf does not show.

Sources:

C. Bancroft Gillespie, Portland Past and Present, Evening Express Publishing Co, 1899

John Neal, Portland Illustrated, Portland, W. S. Jones, 1874

Works Progress Administration, Portland City Guide Forest City Printing Co, 1940.

Guide Books in Maine Historical Society

Portland Daily Press, Wed. May 6, 1868, about ceremonial laying of the cornerstone, and complete contents of cornerstone.

Portland Daily Press, April 2, 1872 (about the formal opening of the building, containing speeches and opinions on the occasion.

Reports of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, Dec. 1866 and Sept. 1867. (These were removed from the cornerstone of the old Post Office in Portland when it was torn down: They are identical to those interred the same day in the cornerstone of the Custom House itself: The former are now in the Maine Historical Society.

Interview July 17 with Miss Lucia Lormier, Custom Collector, Portland, Maine and stereoptican slide in her possession.

Prepared by: Martha Kingsbury
HABS Maine III
1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. This structure is an excellent and well preserved example of late 19th century architecture for the Federal Government. Interior detail and furnishings are of special value.
2. Condition of the Fabric: Excellent

B. Detailed Description of the Exterior:

1. This structure is a three level, rectangular granite building with a tower over both major entrances; each floor is clearly articulated with belt courses and variations in fenestration. It has a hipped roof covered with slate shingles.
2. Foundations: Brick and granite masonry.
3. Wall Construction: Wall bearing granite masonry.
 - a. First floor: Heavy rustication
 - b. Second and Third floors: Engaged Doric columns and pilasters at corner bays in northeast and southeast elevations, and in northwest and southwest elevations.
4. Structural system: Post and beam, wall bearing construction. Members include round iron columns, riveted box girders, flat brick vaults between iron joists.
5. Porches, stoops: Entrance towers at northwest and southeast elevations. The northwest (Fore Street) elevation has semi-circular steps with curved molded granite railing.
6. Chimneys: Round and rectangular metal stacks.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors:
 1. Entrance doorways in northwest and southeast elevations, two wood, two-panel doors per opening.
 2. Service doors on southwest and northeast, wood panel with diamond design at center rail.
 - b. Windows:
 1. First floor windows in arched openings, DH 2/2 wire mesh openings.

2. Second and third floor windows in round arch heads, continuous coping at spring line, DH 2/2 sash, balusters and/or panel insert between sill and floor.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape: Hip roof with slate shingles
- b. Cornice: Classic bracket cornice, plain entablature on southwest and northeast elevations, except at corners and northwest and southeast elevations when a Doric frieze and cornice occurs. Balustrade at roof edge.
- c. Towers: Granite towers occur at each entrance. Classic decoration including four Corinthian pilasters each side, entablature pediments with Greek antifixes. convex mansard roof with balustrade. Round arch window each side with Palladian window insert.

C. Detailed Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First (Ground) floor: Southeast entrance (Commercial Street); offices, storerooms, receiving area, toilet; boiler room at lower level; sub-basement at southeast stair and tower. Stair to principal floor.
- b. Second or principal floor: Northwest (Fore Street) entrance into Main Floor of Customs with counters and tellers' windows; offices, stairways to first and third floors.
- c. Third floor: Offices and upper part of Main Floor of Customs. Gallery or catwalk around Main Floor Stairs to towers.

2. Stairways:

- a. Main stairway: Two; flying stairs, granite treads and risers, gilded iron balusters, wood railing, iron strings with elaborate molding patterns.
- b. Wood stairways to towers.

3. Flooring: Hardwood with carpet and plastic covering; Dark red and white marble tiles set in diagonal, green surround. Painted brick floor in parts of first (ground) floor.

4. Wall and ceiling finish:

- a. Wall: Plaster, walnut baseboard and panels below

window sills, plaster moldings at window surrounds.

- b. Ceilings: Plaster; coffered ceiling in Main room with variety of rope, dentil, egg and dart, bracket, meander and miscellaneous classic moldings.

5. Doorways and doors:

- a. Doorways, heavy walnut molded surrounds, transoms, iron thresholds. Elaborate carved overdoor in Main room employs Custom and Treasury Department symbols.
- b. Doors: Two - three panel doors per opening.

- 6. Decorative features: Italian marble fireplace surrounds and mantels; plaster medallions in ceilings of principal rooms. Bracketed catwalk or gallery around main room at second floor level, wood and metal railing with medallion inserts. Marble and walnut counters and tellers' windows. Central writing desk (octagonal) with column and spherical finial clock with four faces. Wood eagles (2), former finials of flag staffs at towers, are in the southeast stairway.
- 7. Notable hardware: Original hardware, brass doorknobs with Custom Department symbols, keyhole covers, etc. Iron fronts in some fireplaces.
- 8. Lighting: None of importance. Original gas lights removed
- 9. Heating: Fireplaces in principal offices. Cast iron steam (low pressure) radiators.

D. Site and orientation:

The structure faces northwest on Fore Street, Custom and Pearl Streets at either side, and overlooks Commercial Street and to opposite Custom House Wharf. Service area-ways from Commercial Street extend into sloping site each side of the building, cast iron railings at back and sides.

Prepared by:

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H.A.B.S. Maine Coast 1965